

# Scottsboro Boys Trials

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The Scottsboro Boys Trials that took place in Alabama from 1931 to 1937 falsely indicted nine black youths of raping two white women. Conflicting evidence, allegations of racism in the courts, and general belief of the boys' innocence eventually led to the release of some of the group, while the rest were later paroled or escaped and were eventually pardoned. The trials marked a significant example of what was considered the continuing legacy of racism and legal injustice in the American South.

## The Incident

On March 25, 1931, a group of young white and black men illegally riding a freight train along the Tennessee-Alabama border began fighting one another. While the train passed over the Alabama state line, the conflict culminated in the black youths throwing the white men off the train. The white group then had a stationmaster telegram down the line to an armed gang in Paint Rock, Alabama, who stopped the train and collected nine black boys on suspicion of assaulting the white men. The boys—Olen Montgomery, Clarence Norris, Haywood Patterson, Ozie Powell, Willie Robertson, Charles Weems, Eugene Williams, Andy Wright, and Roy Wright—were then imprisoned in nearby Scottsboro, Alabama, to await formal charging. Two young white women who had been aboard the train, Victoria Price and Ruby Bates, soon came forward and accused the black youths of having raped them. All nine boys, ranging in age from twelve to nineteen, were officially arrested for rape.

## The Trials

*Trial #1* That April, the Scottsboro Boys, as they were now known, entered court to be tried in groups of two and three. Several factors contributed to the boys' ultimate defeat in initial court appearances. First, they had been given unprofessional and ineffective legal counsel—a real estate lawyer and an elderly attorney who had not tried a case in decades—who offered no witnesses or closing arguments to the jury. Then the testimonies of the boys themselves conflicted with one another, as six denied the rapes entirely while the other three alleged that the six had committed the acts; the boys later stated they lied about the rapes because they had been beaten and threatened. Finally, the accusers themselves, Price and Bates, appeared in court to testify against the boys, offering evidence deemed conclusive by the prosecution. The four separate trials resulted in all but one of the boys being charged with rape and sentenced to death. Roy Wright, at twelve years old, received a hung jury when jurors could not decide to impose either the death penalty or life imprisonment.

The convictions of the Scottsboro Boys ignited a storm of both praise and criticism across the United States, with different groups either affirming the boys' guilt or claiming their innocence while alleging racism in the Alabama legal system. The Communist Party of the United States, which was seeking more members in the South, declared the youths innocent and took up their case by means of its International Labor Defense (ILD) legal team. The ILD first appealed to the Alabama Supreme Court, which in January of 1932 upheld eight of the guilty convictions but ruled that Roy Wright, by then thirteen years old, should have been tried as a juvenile. In the official ruling *Powell v. Alabama*, the US Supreme Court ordered retrials of all the boys on the grounds of a

violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted defendants the right to proper legal counsel.

**Trial #2** With the Scottsboro Boys cases now being managed by esteemed New York attorney Samuel Leibowitz, the retrials began in March of 1933 in Alabama. After questioning Price, one of the boys' original two accusers, Leibowitz asserted that she was a prostitute whose medical examination following the incident of two years before had shown that she had not been raped. He also claimed that she had fabricated her accusation to deflect attention from her own illicit sexual activity with the white men aboard the train. The testimonies of the boys themselves were again spotty and sometimes contradictory, as several experienced difficulty recalling the two-year-old event. Leibowitz and the defense appeared to secure a breakthrough with the sudden court appearance of the other accuser, Bates, who claimed that Price had pressured her to invent the story of the rape to avoid arrest for prostitution. However, Bates's testimony was never considered as evidence.

**Trial #3** Patterson's verdict was the first to be passed. He was found guilty of rape and sentenced to death, but Judge James Horton believed he was innocent and ordered yet another retrial of the boys. With the case now under Judge William Callahan, Patterson was convicted in his third trial while Norris was convicted in his second. Callahan then delayed the trials of the other seven boys until the verdicts of Patterson and Norris could be appealed. In early 1935, Leibowitz brought the two boys' cases to the US Supreme Court to argue that neither jury had included any black members and that the names of several black people had been forged on the jury rolls. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Leibowitz in its decision *Norris v. Alabama*, which negated Patterson's and Norris's death sentences.

At the conclusion of Patterson's fourth trial in January of 1936, he was sentenced to seventy-five years in prison. Appeals of the decision lasted months, indefinitely postponing the trials of the other eight boys. However, after negotiations of a compromise between the prosecution and the defense dissolved, the trials resumed in July of 1937. Within weeks, Norris had been sentenced to death, Andy Wright was sentenced to ninety-nine years, Weems received a sentence of seventy-five years, and Powell was acquitted of rape but convicted of assaulting a corrections officer during his confinement. The prosecution dropped the rape charges against the other four boys, as Robertson and Montgomery were considered innocent while Williams and Roy Wright were released based on their youth and the six years they had already served in prison.

The five imprisoned Scottsboro Boys served several years. Each was eventually paroled: Weems in 1943, Powell and Norris in 1946, and Andy Wright in 1950. In 1948 Patterson escaped to Michigan; two years later he avoided arrest by the FBI when the governor of Michigan refused to extradite him to Alabama. Patterson was later convicted of manslaughter and died in prison in 1952. The rest of the Scottsboro Boys gradually died over the ensuing years, with Norris being the last to die in 1989.

## Legacy and Significance

In the decades following the arrests, civil rights activists maintained that the Scottsboro Boys Trials proved that Alabama was still embroiled in its history of racism and legal misconduct. In 1976, in an effort to amend this image and deliver a measure of justice in the events of forty years earlier, Alabama Governor George Wallace officially pardoned Norris. In 2013 the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles voted to grant posthumous pardons to Patterson, Weems, and Andy Wright, the last of the Scottsboro Boys to receive clemency for the rape charges.

The pardons were praised in Alabama by civil rights attorneys and state government officials, who viewed the

board's vote as an admission of state wrongdoing in imprisoning innocent men while initially denying them competent legal counsel and barring blacks from their juries. Supporters of the 2013 pardons stated that the Scottsboro Boys case should remind Alabama to become more judicious in its legal proceedings, as in 2013 the state possessed one of the highest rates of imprisonment in the country. Since their conclusion in 1937, the Scottsboro Boys Trials have become the focus of television films, a Broadway production, and the Scottsboro Boys Museum and Cultural Center in Alabama.

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